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## How Our Students View Gender Roles

Annette Tomal  
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### Abstract

Student views of the role of women in the family were compared with results from a National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). Freshmen and seniors from an evangelical Christian college were surveyed with 498 responses. The college students were more likely to support traditional gender roles than the NSFH respondents. Freshmen (41%) were more supportive of traditional gender roles than seniors (22%). Senior females (71%) were least supportive of traditional gender roles, compared with freshman males (31%). Seniors (35%) were more likely than freshmen (24%) to approve of mothers of preschoolers working full-time. Senior females (43%) were most supportive of working mothers, compared with freshman males (20%). Almost 60% of the students lived in families with a stay-at-home mother; just over 10% of the students had full-time working mothers during their school years. About 50% of freshman females and 25% of senior females hope to be stay-at-home mothers, compared with about 60% of the male students preferring a stay-at-home wife. The paper also provides a historical and theological discussion of the changing roles of mothers in the family throughout history.

Many students in evangelical Christian colleges come from families in which mothers do not work outside the home. Many of the female students enter college planning to pursue the same life plan as their mothers – stay-at-home moms – and many leave college with that same goal. But other female students become conflicted as they progress through their courses and start visualizing careers or graduate study. Male students may become conflicted about their views on gender roles as they see their female professors managing both career and home.

The stay-at-home mother is no longer the norm in our country and has not been for many decades since women started entering the labor force in large numbers beginning in the 1960s. About 60% of women were in the labor force in March 2010: 58.8% of all women and 61.7% of married women with spouse present (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Of women with children, the labor force participation rates were very similar between all mothers and married mothers with spouse present. In March 2010, the labor force included 71.3% of mothers with children under 18 years (69.7% of married mothers), 77.2% of mothers of children ages 6-17 (75.9% of married mothers), and 64.2% of mothers with children under six years (62.5% of married mothers) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Almost three-fourths of women with a college degree are in the work force (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Not only is the so-called traditional family – in which the mother is the full-time homemaker – no longer the norm in this country, neither is the traditional family as historical as many people presume, dating back only to the mid-1800s.

Therefore, for those of us working in evangelical Christian colleges, we may have students who express confusion about gender roles, especially when these students see few (if any) role models of professional career women in their evangelical churches.

This paper is a descriptive study that first provides a historical background and theological discussion of gender roles and then reports the results of a survey given to evangelical Christian college students to ascertain their views about the role of mothers in the family, comparing their views with a national survey initially given to over 12,000 people.

#### Historical Background of Gender Roles

Plato (360 B.C.E.) may have been the first widely published author to discuss the necessity of division of labor within a society:

Well, then, how will our state supply these needs? It will need a farmer, a builder, and a weaver, and also, I think, a shoemaker and one or two others to provide for our bodily needs. So that the minimum state would consist of four or five men. (p. 103)

While Plato did not mention the necessity of a homemaker within a society, gender played a role in division of labor even before Plato's time. Even today in pre-agricultural societies, men hunt and women gather; a similar division of labor happened early in the history of mankind and allowed the human species to expand their population (Kuhn, 2006). Signs of division of labor can be found in archaeological records beginning 40,000

years ago with evidence of plant foods being gathered, small animals being eaten, and leather working tools being used. The archaeological record cannot, of course, show which gender was doing what, but almost all known groups of foragers tend to divide work in the same way – men hunt big game because they are stronger and faster, and women hunt small animals and gather plant foods because they are more likely to be involved with childcare and need to remain close to the home (Kleiner, 2006).

In ancient rural economies – and still today in many unindustrialized parts of the world – nearly all consumption goods were produced by the household, such as food, clothing, and shelter. As societies changed from rural economies, so did the role of women. In her extensive research on the lives of women during the Roman Empire, at the time of the birth of Christianity, Cohick (2009) found that women – whether pagans, Jews, or Christians – were actively involved at all levels within their social and religious communities and that gender, class, and social status (and not religious background) were the determining factors of their participation. Women were responsible for the maintenance of the home – regardless of whether they themselves did the work or were wealthy enough to have slaves. In rural areas women worked in the fields. In non-rural areas women might have earned income in domestic fields, such as weaving and tailoring, generally doing the work in the home, although some women did operate shops. Some women worked as moneylenders, and others traded in all sorts of commodities. Women worked in the literary arts, as poets and historians; they worked as painters; they ran businesses, owned slaves, and hired workers. Basically, “women did almost every type of work that was done by men” (other than working as midwives, soldiers, or politicians) (Cohick, 2009, p. 240).

During the Reformation, many households shared both childrearing and a family business. As a result, gender roles were more fluid than were indicated by Martin Luther’s strong stance advocating the woman’s place in the home: “...he took for granted that women should hold neither political nor ecclesiastical office, but rather realize their divine calling almost totally within the home” (VanLeeuwen, 1990, p. 206). For example, cottage industries were the mainstay of wool production in England in the 1700s, and producing wool was work that a mother with young children could do to help in the home to support the household. It was only during the Industrial Revolution that men began leaving their family businesses to join factory work forces, leaving the women to care for the homes and children (Wojtczk, 2004).

Just as industrialization led to the availability of jobs outside the family unit, the advent of technology in household goods decreased the time needed for household work. Household goods could be purchased in the marketplace more economically than they could be produced at home. Now men— no longer needed at home to chop wood, butcher meat, grow corn, etc.—worked outside the home to earn cash to buy household items formerly produced in the home.

With increased family incomes, households could afford to hire servants. Virtually all middle-class households in the 1800s had some paid household help. During the pre-industrialization period, an estimated one-third to one-half of households had live-in servants. The relative number of households with live-in help decreased during the 1800s, even as the absolute number remained high since middle-class households gained status with a full-time servant (Cowan, 1983, p. 121). Caring for children was often delegated to a servant, while tasks requiring judgment and organizational skills remained with

the housewife. By the mid 1900s, because of increased technology for household items, paid household help had virtually disappeared from middle-class households. “Modern technology enabled the American housewife of 1950 to produce singlehandedly what her counterpart of 1850 needed a staff of three or four to produce” (Cowan, 1983, p. 32). This reduced time for housework allowed more married women to enter the labor force (Greenwood, 2005).

With modernization, children are no longer needed as inputs into the production of household goods and services. Household income is more likely to be used to purchase consumer goods rather than cover the cost of rearing more children (Akman, 2002). As a country becomes industrialized, rates of return on investment in education and other human capital measures are higher, birth rates decline, wage rates rise, and more married women enter the labor force (Becker, 1990). In addition, families invest in their children’s education more equally, resulting in higher education attainment levels for females (Tamura & Sadler, 2000). As women achieve higher education attainment levels, they are more likely to enter the work force and have fewer children as the opportunity cost of staying at home rearing children increases (Jejeebhoy, 1995).

Thus, the family with the full-time stay-at-home mother with no household help is a relatively recent phenomenon in world history, especially for middle-class families in industrialized economies, dating back only to mid 1800s and early 1900s (VanLeeuwen, 1990). And, as the economics of division of labor and specialization redefined the role of women in the family, the image of the ideal wife also changed. Whereas wives had previously been valued for their hard work within the household production unit – whether on the farm or in small shops – now industrialization in the nineteenth century equated piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness with the desired feminine wife (Welter, 1978). It is this model that many Christians today claim as the biblical role for women, the role that did not manifest itself to such a pervasive degree until the nineteenth century.

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### Theology of Gender Roles

Van Leeuwen (1990), who wrote on the theology of work and gender beginning with the ancient Greeks, to the Reformers, to changing family roles during the post-Industrial Revolution years, argued for a post-industrial alternative, one in which the “public, wage-earning sphere [does not] always remain geographically separate from the private, domestic sphere” (p. 207).

It is precisely on the basis of creation theology that I argue for change. For if both men and women were created for both sociability and accountable dominion, then any theology that defends an exaggerated separation of male and female spheres, with the “domestic mandate” effectively limited to women and the wider “cultural mandate” to men, is not an adequate creation theology at all. It is rather an accommodation to those social forces which have carelessly ripped apart the organic unity of homes and communities and turned us into a society of commuting wage workers (mostly men) and domestically isolated homemakers (mostly women). (p. 206)

The debate over working mothers is divisive and became especially relevant in the 1970s when women entered the workplace in growing numbers, eventually becoming more than half the labor force. The growth of women in the workplace was so dramatic that the Department of Labor published a report entitled “The Myth and the Reality” in 1974 (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1974) in which they stated that 9 of 10 girls would be in the labor force at some point in their lives. The rapid and growing entry of women into the workplace was called the “subtle revolution” (Smith, 1979, p. ix), a revolution affecting virtually “all our social and economic arrangements” (Smith, 1979, p. 1) because of the doubling of the female labor force in less than a generation, and the subtle, not easily-defined origins, predictability of outcomes, or consequences (Smith, 1979, p. ix). Smith is quoted in a *Wall Street Journal* article saying, “The rise in the number of women who work for pay amounts to a ‘Subtle Revolution’ looming at least as large as the Industrial Revolution that shook Europe nearly two centuries ago” (Roistacher & Young, 1980).

Because Christian women were among the females entering the labor force, “conservative churches and parachurch organizations reacted with alarm and strong pronouncements that mothers belonged at home with their children” (Miles, 2006, p. 173). Miles (2006) notes, however, that Paul’s admonition to nurture in Ephesians 5-6 was directed to fathers and that the evangelical church’s promoting stay-at-home mothers does not reflect God’s calling that both parents provide for their children emotionally and spiritually. Miles believes “there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that the traditional sexual division of labor reflects God’s will, and there is much to suggest that it does not” (p. 174).

The view of the ideal woman as a full-time homemaker was never universal, even among Christians (Ward & Stout, 1981).

if the church will listen, their voices can be heard: shouting their exhilaration and excitement at the possibilities offered by their new roles within society, calling for role models as they forge new ways of life, questioning and doubting as they try to find their way as Christians in a changing world, seeking emotional support as they struggle as wage earners for their families. (Ward & Stout, 1981, p. 11)

Some of the strong feelings about wives not entering the workplace are due to the belief of many conservative Christians of the necessity of male headship in a marriage. Yet, evangelicals do not agree on what that means – whether it means being the spiritual leader of the wife/family, the final authority in decisions, or being the primary breadwinner (Miles, 2006). Miles’ survey results demonstrated that 87% of evangelicals believe that marriage is a partnership of equals, 78% support both equality and male headship, and over half of the respondents do not practice “hierarchy” in their marriages.

The debate can be especially galvanizing when opinions are based on religious teachings since specific biblical verses can be interpreted differently by both proponents and opponents of working mothers. For example, people who believe that stay-at-home mothers are supported by biblical teaching might cite 1 Timothy 5:14 as the foundation for this belief: “I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully” (KJV). Kohl (2004)

interprets this verse to mean that Christian women, no matter what age their dependent children, should never work outside the home (unless widowed or divorced) and that to “guide” the house means to physically be home managing the household.

Proponents of Christian working mothers, on the other hand, do not believe that the Bible mandates that a mother stay at home and argue that 1 Timothy 5:14 indicates that the mother’s job is to manage the home but that she can do so whether at home or in the workplace (Chastain, 2009). This group often cites the Proverbs 31 woman as the consummate model of a mother and wife who is also a successful businesswoman and household manager.

Yet, many Christian women who are in the labor force believe they have been called to their career, just as other Christian women feel called to be a full-time homemaker. Even though the Reformers preached that all work is God’s calling and to do all our activities for God’s glory – whether at work, home, church, or anywhere else in society – Martin Luther may have preached that women are created in the image of God less than man: “so the woman was [created] inferior to the man both in honor and dignity” (Luther, 1958). Luther believed that women, without housewifery, “were good for nothing” (Van Leeuwen, 1990, p. 199). Even today, many Christians still hold hierarchical views of occupations that are more worthy than others, and many evangelical Christians believe that the decision to be a full-time homemaker is the more worthy choice for a mother.

In summary, the historical background of gender roles illustrate that they were not dictated solely by biology but also by technology and a variety of societal and political factors. Women, by necessity, were full-time homemakers when families were large and housekeeping was labor-intensive. Today, most families are no longer large, and technology has greatly reduced the amount of time needed to maintain a home. “It is ... likely that the roles of men and women, which developed initially as a rational response to conditions that existed at one time in the course of economic development, continue their hold long after they ceased to be functional” (Blau, 2006, p. 33).

The “traditional family” with the husband as the primary breadwinner and the wife as the full-time homemaker is no longer the norm in our society, as married couples with children account for less than a quarter of all households; 23% of children live with a single mother and 5% with a single father; and 70% of children live in families in which all adults in the household are employed (The Mother Company, 2011). Yet, because many conservative Christians believe that the Bible calls for traditional family gender roles, one would expect that evangelical Christian college students would believe more strongly in traditional gender roles than the general public. That is the purpose of this study: to determine the degree to which students from an evangelical Christian college favor traditional gender roles, compared with the general public.

### Methodology

To determine the beliefs of evangelical Christian college students about the role of mothers, a survey was distributed through Zoomerang in 2008 to freshmen and seniors at a Midwestern evangelical Christian college. The survey was sent to 1,060 students: 564 freshmen and 496 seniors. A total of 498 surveys were returned, for a 47% response rate: 249 freshmen (44% response) and 249 seniors (50% response). The gender mix was fairly similar between the two groups of respondents, with about 40% male and 60%

female. All but 8% of the respondents were in two-parent households throughout their preschool and elementary school years. Of these students in two-parent households, 65% had stay-at-home mothers as preschoolers, and 58% had stay-at-home mothers during their elementary years.

The survey had three questions: two questions from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and one question asking the students' desired role of the mother once they had a family with preschool children.

The survey's first two questions were taken verbatim from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH):

1. *It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family.*
2. *It is all right for mothers to work full-time when their youngest child is under five.*

The NSFH surveyed one adult from 12,344 randomly selected households in 1987-88, 9,754 of these adults again in 1992-94, and finally 7,192 of these adults again in 2001-02. In addition, 1,937 children of these adults, who were between 5-17 in the 1987-88 survey, were themselves surveyed as adults in 2001-02.

## Survey Results

### National Survey of Families and Households Questions

Survey expectations were that the college students would be more likely to believe in traditional gender roles than the NSFH Children and Adults. Table 1 compares responses for the college students and for the NSFH Children and Adults regarding level of agreement with traditional gender roles.

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Table 1

#### *NSFH-Christian college comparison*

Question #1: *It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family.*

|                                   | NSFH Survey |          |         | Christian College |          |         |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------|---------|-------------------|----------|---------|
|                                   | 1987- 88    | 1992 -94 | 2001-02 | Children          | Freshmen | Seniors |
| <i>Strongly agree</i>             | 23.15%      | 17.58%   | 11.64%  | 5.83%             | 8.84%    | 5.62%   |
| <i>Agree</i>                      | 24.45%      | 23.06%   | 31.10%  | 17.14%            | 31.73%   | 16.06%  |
| <i>Neither agree nor disagree</i> | 28.53%      | 26.54%   | 12.14%  | 12.65%            | 25.70%   | 21.69%  |
| <i>Disagree</i>                   | 15.41%      | 21.58%   | 32.34%  | 36.40%            | 22.89%   | 26.10%  |
| <i>Strongly disagree</i>          | 8.46%       | 11.24%   | 12.78%  | 27.98%            | 10.84%   | 30.52%  |
|                                   | 100%        | 100%     | 100%    | 100%              | 100%     | 100%    |
|                                   | n=12,344    | n=9,754  | n=7,192 | n=1,937           | n=249    | n=249   |

NOTE: (1) The first three columns are NSFH results for adults; in 1987-88 one adult from randomly selected household was surveyed; the same person was surveyed again in 1992-94 and in 2001-02.

(2) NSFH "Children" respondents were children ages 5-17 of the respondents in the 1987-88 survey and were adults when surveyed in 2001-02.

(3) The last two columns are from the survey given to the Christian college freshmen and seniors.

The NSFH adults became slightly less conservative about traditional gender roles as they aged, meaning they were less likely to believe that the role of the man was breadwinner and the woman that of homemaker. Their adult children were even less likely to believe in the need to adhere to traditional gender roles. As predicted, the college freshmen were very different from the NSFH children and were more like the children’s parents in their belief in traditional gender roles, that is, 41% of freshmen strongly agreed/agreed with traditional gender roles, as did 48% of the NSFH adults in 1987-88 and 43% of these same adults in 2001-02. The seniors, however, were very similar to the NSFH children. Twenty-two percent of seniors and 23% of the NSFH adult children agreed with traditional gender roles. The level of disagreement, however, was also similar between the NSFH adult children and the seniors. Twenty-eight percent of the NSFH adult children and 30.5% of the seniors “strongly disagreed” that the traditional gender roles are better, compared with 11% of the freshmen who “strongly disagreed.”

Table 2 compares the college student responses by gender and by year in college for their level of agreement with traditional gender roles.

Table 2

*Freshmen, seniors and gender differences*

Question #1: *It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family.*



|                                   | <i>Freshmen/Senior</i> |         | <i>Males</i> |         | <i>Females</i> |         |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|---------|--------------|---------|----------------|---------|
|                                   | Freshmen               | Seniors | Freshmen     | Seniors | Freshmen       | Seniors |
| <i>Strongly agree</i>             | 8.84%                  | 5.62%   | 12.04%       | 10.10%  | 6.38%          | 2.67%   |
| <i>Agree</i>                      | 31.73%                 | 16.06%  | 31.48%       | 24.24%  | 31.91%         | 10.67%  |
| <i>Neither agree nor disagree</i> | 25.70%                 | 21.69%  | 25.00%       | 30.30%  | 26.24%         | 16.00%  |
| <i>Disagree</i>                   | 22.89%                 | 26.10%  | 22.22%       | 24.24%  | 23.40%         | 27.33%  |
| <i>Strongly disagree</i>          | 10.84%                 | 30.52%  | 9.26%        | 11.11%  | 12.06%         | 43.33%  |
|                                   | 100%                   | 100%    | 100%         | 100%    | 100%           | 100%    |
|                                   | n=249                  | n=249   | n=108        | n=99    | n=141          | n=150   |

Mann-Whitney test for senior-freshmen differences, p-value = .000

Mann-Whitney test for senior-freshmen differences, males only, p-value = .2810

Mann-Whitney test for senior-freshmen differences, females only, p-value = .000

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, freshmen only, p-value = .2544

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, seniors only, p-value = .000

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, entire survey, p-value = .000

Students’ beliefs about gender roles depended, to some degree, on their gender and on their age. In general, freshmen were more in favor of traditional gender roles (41%) and seniors were least in favor (22%). More specifically, freshman males were most strongly in favor of traditional gender roles (44%), while senior females were least in favor of traditional gender roles (13%).

Table 3 compares responses between the college students and the NSFH Children and Adults regarding level of agreement with whether or not a mother of a pre-school child should work full time.

Table 3

*NFHS-Christian college comparison*

Question #2: *It is all right for mothers to work full-time when their youngest child is under age five.*

|                                   | <i>NSFH Survey</i> |          |         | <i>Christian College</i> |          |         |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|----------|---------|--------------------------|----------|---------|
|                                   | 1987- 88           | 1992 -94 | 2001-02 | Children                 | Freshmen | Seniors |
| <i>Strongly agree</i>             | 9.21%              | 5.02%    | 1.69%   | 7.84%                    | 7.63%    | 12.45%  |
| <i>Agree</i>                      | 7.77%              | 34.01%   | 42.81%  | 55.24%                   | 16.06%   | 22.49%  |
| <i>Neither agree nor disagree</i> | 27.92%             | 30.42%   | 14.15%  | 9.81%                    | 15.66%   | 21.29%  |
| <i>Disagree</i>                   | 24.30%             | 22.85%   | 37.00%  | 23.26%                   | 39.36%   | 26.91%  |
| <i>Strongly disagree</i>          | 20.79%             | 7.70%    | 4.36%   | 3.84%                    | 21.29%   | 16.87%  |
|                                   | 100%               | 100%     | 100%    | 100%                     | 100%     | 100%    |
|                                   | n=12,307           | n=9,649  | n=7,160 | n=1,926                  | n=249    | n=249   |

The college freshmen were even more likely to reject working mothers than the NSFH parents. Only 24% of freshmen strongly agreed/agreed that mothers of young children should work, compared to 45% of the NSFH parents in 2001-02. Seniors were very different from NSFH children, even though their top responses were similar. That is, 63% of NSFH children accepted working mothers compared with 35% of seniors. Overall, the college groups had much higher levels of disagreement than the NSFH groups. The survey found that 21% of freshmen and 17% of seniors strongly disagreed with mothers of young children working full-time, compared to only 4% of NSFH children and their parents.

Table 4 compares the college student responses by gender and by year in college for their level of agreement with whether the mother of a pre-school child should work full time.

Table 4

*Freshmen, seniors and gender differences*

Question #2: *It is all right for mothers to work full-time when their youngest child is under age five.*

|                                   | <i>Freshmen/Senior</i> |         | <i>Males</i> |         | <i>Females</i> |         |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|---------|--------------|---------|----------------|---------|
|                                   | Freshmen               | Seniors | Freshmen     | Seniors | Freshmen       | Seniors |
| <i>Strongly agree</i>             | 7.63%                  | 12.45%  | 7.41%        | 9.09%   | 7.80%          | 14.67%  |
| <i>Agree</i>                      | 16.06%                 | 22.99%  | 12.96%       | 14.19%  | 18.44%         | 28.00%  |
| <i>Neither agree nor disagree</i> | 15.66%                 | 21.29%  | 15.74%       | 17.17%  | 15.60%         | 24.00%  |
| <i>Disagree</i>                   | 39.36%                 | 26.91%  | 41.67%       | 33.33%  | 37.59%         | 22.67%  |
| <i>Strongly disagree</i>          | 21.29%                 | 16.87%  | 22.22%       | 26.26%  | 20.57%         | 10.67%  |
|                                   | 100%                   | 100%    | 100%         | 100%    | 100%           | 100%    |
|                                   | n=249                  | n=249   | n=108        | n=99    | n=141          | n=150   |

Mann-Whitney test for Senior-Freshmen differences, p-value = .0009

Mann-Whitney test for Senior-Freshmen differences, Males only, p-value = .8934

Mann-Whitney test for Senior-Freshmen differences, Females only, p-value = .0001

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, Freshmen only, p-value = .3896

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, Seniors only, p-value = .0000

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, entire survey, p-value = .0000

Again, males were more in favor of traditional gender roles and specifically that mothers of young children should not work full-time. For this question, freshmen – both males and females – were least likely to approve of young mothers working full-time (24% compared with 35% of seniors). The greatest difference was between senior males and females with females more likely to favor working mothers (43% of females compared with 26% of males).

Survey Question #3: "If I Were Married with Preschool Children..."

Students were asked their preference for the mother's role if the mother had preschool children. Results are presented in Table 5. Even though less than one-third of the students agreed with the first question in the survey, "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family," close to half the students (47%) would ideally like a stay-at-home mother in their own future household with preschool children. Just fewer than 20% of the students would prefer that the mother work part-time. Almost a third would like to share caretaking/work responsibilities with their spouse.



Table 5

*Freshmen, senior, and gender differences*

Question #3: "If I were married with preschool children, I would prefer(my wife) to..."

|                                 | <i>Freshmen</i> |         | <i>Seniors</i> |         |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|---------|----------------|---------|
|                                 | Males           | Females | Males          | Females |
| <i>Be a stay-at-home mother</i> | 57.40%          | 49.70%  | 62.60%         | 25.70%  |
| <i>Work part-time</i>           | 13.00%          | 25.90%  | 5.10%          | 25.70%  |
| <i>Work full-time</i>           | 0.00%           | 0.70%   | 0.00%          | 1.40%   |
| <i>Share caretaking/working</i> | 29.60%          | 23.80%  | 30.30%         | 45.30%  |
| <i>Be primary breadwinner</i>   | 0.00%           | 0.00%   | 2.00%          | 2.00%   |
|                                 | 100%            | 100%    | 100%           | 100%    |
|                                 | n=108           | n=141   | n=99           | n=150   |

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, p-value = .0003

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, Freshmen only, p-value = .634

Mann-Whitney test for gender differences, Seniors only, p-value = .000

Mann-Whitney test for Freshman-Senior differences, p-value = .0005

Mann-Whitney test for Freshman-Senior, Males only, p-value = .7844

Mann-Whitney test for Freshman-Senior, Females only, p-value = .0000

Men were more likely to want the mother to stay-at-home, but the difference between genders was most striking for seniors. Only 26% of senior females wanted to be a stay-at-home mother compared with the 63% of senior males who wanted a stay-at-home wife. Only 5% of senior males wanted their wives to work at all compared with 26% of senior females who would ideally like to work at least part-time when they have preschool children. Gender differences for freshmen are not significant; just fewer than half of the freshman females wanted to be a stay-at-home mom compared with 57% of the freshman males who wanted a stay-at-home wife.

Virtually none of the respondents wanted the mother of young children to work full-time – only 0.4%. A significant percentage of all the groups would ideally like to share caretaking/work responsibilities, between 24% (freshman females) and 45% (senior females).

### Respondents' Comments

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide a comment. The majority of the respondents who provided comments supported traditional gender roles, and many felt quite strongly that parents should make children the priority rather than pursue dual-income careers.

The freshmen tended to view the decision as “black-and-white” – the mother should stay at home, period. Many cited their own positive childhood experience of having a stay-at-home mother. However, three freshman females had very strong opinions against traditional gender roles; their comments are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

#### *Selected Freshman Female Comments*

I HATE the idea that women are solely for caretaking and are incapable of work. That idea has nearly made me lose my faith several times. Stereotypes are stupid and I defy them. Just because I'm female doesn't mean my only purpose is to have kids, and when I have them my life and career don't have to end. In my family, my mom worked full time and my dad stayed home. I have had many debates concerning this topic, and I strongly believe that it is okay for a mother to work and raise children in a positive environment. My mom worked full time while managing to make dinner every night, spend quality time with my sister and me, and to keep the household tidy and functioning.

The seniors, whose survey responses reflected support for working mothers and disagreement with traditional gender roles, had responses more similar to the freshmen's, although more reflective and not as dogmatic; selected comments are presented in Table 7. Many of the seniors viewed the parenting and breadwinning responsibilities as decisions that needed to be worked out within the family unit, yet believed it important that one parent – whether the mother or the father – be the primary caregiver at least while children were young. Many of the seniors also cited appreciation for their own stay-at-home mothers. Some of the senior females looked beyond the issue of to work or not to work for mothers of young children but brought into the discussion the historical patriarchal gender roles.

Table 7

*Selected Senior Female Comments*

My mom has always been a stay-at-home mom, and I know that that fact contributed greatly to my happy childhood. I also know that my mom wouldn't have wanted it any other way. My pro-working-mothers slant on this quiz is a response to the patriarchal ideal of fathers at work and mothers in the home rather than something that springs out of my background. So many Christians believe that that patriarchal ideal is explicitly biblical, rather than a middle-class lifestyle that arose in Victorian England and passed into American culture. I think the church's emphasis on the nuclear, conventional style of family life is limiting to men, women, and the concept of family. Especially to women. Neither the church nor our society should be telling women that their proper place is in the home at any time in their lives.

I think the church confuses historical positions of women with biblical "gender roles" -- forgetting that God as 'father' implies an incredibly demanding standard of completely self-sacrificial love, and speaking only of 'submission' for women, read through societal paradigms that continue to hold that women are somehow fundamentally less competent than men and complementing this with a quickly formulated 'Eve-ate-the-apple' response to conclude that women ought to remain homemakers... as if to deny that 'fallenness' also corresponds to warped thought patterns regarding women.

I think the dichotomy between the mother working part-time/staying at home and "my parents shared caretaking responsibilities" is a false one. A mother can be stay-at-home as well as sharing the responsibilities of raising, disciplining, and loving her children with her husband. Both parents should be involved in caretaking responsibilities even if one is a primary breadwinner and the other stay-at-home. To pit one against the other is a false division.

## Conclusion

Many questions arise from these survey results:

Will the freshmen have similar survey responses as the seniors when they become seniors?

Will the senior women change their views about gender roles if they marry and have children?

What is most influencing household choices regarding the mother's role – childhood experiences, church teaching, self-selection into communities with similar views?

Are the students' childhood experiences based on income levels that can afford a stay-at-home mother versus religious or personal beliefs?

Would responses be very different for non-religious college students who had stay-at-home mothers because of affluence versus religious or personal beliefs that the mother should not work?

A limitation of the survey study is that only one school was used, but the results could be generalized to some degree for students at other evangelical Christian colleges. Further research could expand the survey to other Christian colleges as well as secular colleges. Based on the results of this survey, however, female students at evangelical Christian colleges who aspire to a career may have few role models of professional working women/mothers and may feel less support from their classmates. Female administrators and faculty at Christian colleges, therefore, are essential for both male and female students as they model a lifestyle that can combine a profession and family and help students work through their own personal beliefs about the role of mothers in the family.

College students – female and male – need to know that being a stay-at-home mother is an admirable calling but not the only way for a Christian mother to live out her life. Female professionals in higher education are already modeling being a professional working woman. Male professionals in higher education need to provide college students with support and advice no matter what they decide – even if the view does not align with their own family situations and beliefs. 

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